

CHRISTIAN ADORNMENT IN *THE MAN OF LAW'S TALE*¹

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The Man of Law's profession brings him fees and robes, and he rides on the pilgrimage in a parti-colored coat with a barred girdle. Laura Hodges explains this as "a belt probably made of tablet weaving with imported silk threads and, therefore, a luxury item."² So it may be; but he has left his ceremonial clothes at home and rides "but hoonly." No doubt long robes would be an impediment on a pilgrimage, but Chaucer deliberately discourages too much attention being paid to his clothing, saying at the end of his portrait, "Of his array telle I no lenger tale" (*Canterbury Tales*, I.330).³ In a similarly suggestive hint at the potential importance of attire, *The Man of Law's Tale* begins with merchants who deal, among other things, in "satyns riche of hewe" (II.137), fabrics appropriate to the East, as wool would have been if they were trading in England. But, in spite of this opening imagery, in the entire tale the narrator will in fact identify only two items of clothing: Custance's headdress and a messenger's girdle. The Man of Law obviously could, if only he would, say plenty about attire, and we might reasonably have expected clothing to play a significant part in his tale. The expected descriptions are lacking, however, and I would argue that their omission is itself symbolically significant.

The audience might well expect descriptions of clothing in a tale that exhibits so many features of the romance genre.⁴ At least one analogue, the romance of *Emaré*, features the heroine's lavishly described robe as a leading motif. In a secular romance like *Sir Launfal*, rich and poor clothing is described in some detail,⁵ but this aspect of romance is largely absent from the Man of Law's pious legend. His cloth-merchants discuss not their wares but Custance's beauty and goodness. They have not dealt with her personally, as their counterparts do with Gower's Constance,⁶ but their second-hand account of her spiritual qualities enflames the sultan's desire for a Christian wife. When she is married, sight unseen, the Man of Law deliberately declines to say what the guests did or what the bride wore: "What sholde I tellen of the roialtee / At marriage?" (703-04).

The expectation would also be reasonable if we believe that Chaucer wished to suit his tale to the teller. But this is by no means a necessary assumption. Several critics have blamed the Man of Law for alleged inconsistencies in his tale;⁷ my own view is that Chaucer

sometimes presents, as typical, a reaction to a situation which the narrative goes on to show is mistaken. When this happens, neither he nor his narrator is to be blamed as endorsing the inadequate viewpoint. For example, Chauncey Wood suggests that the Man of Law is a materialist who wants Custance's marriage with the sultan to succeed since it is a wealthy one, and who fails to appreciate that for her it would be a bondage preventing her from realizing her full Christian potential (192-244). Significantly, the rich royal attire which would doubtless be of great interest to such a materialist is not described, either when Custance marries the sultan or when, more advantageously, Christ through Alla makes her a Queen (693). Once again, it seems to be in keeping with Chaucer's thematic portrayal of Custance's unostentatious goodness that such external trappings should not be over-emphasized.

Indeed, it is perhaps not fortuitous that the words "dresse" and "array" in *The Man of Law's Tale* mean "get ready, go," rather than "dress up." When Alla and his wife Custance go to dinner with the emperor in Rome, no doubt they do put on their best, but Alla "arrayed" for the feast the previous night (the Riverside edition suggests he "planned" for it); and when next morning "Alla gan him dresse, / And eek his wyf, this Emperour to meete" (1100-01) they have more on their minds than what to wear. As a noun, "array" means "condition"; it refers to the splendid equipment (implied, not described) and organization of Custance's Roman escort and their Syrian hosts (393-94), but also to the pitiful state Custance is in when the senator finds her drifting on the sea (972).

The reason for the lack of detailed descriptions of the rich attire which Custance as an emperor's daughter and a sultan's and later a king's wife may be assumed to be wearing is doubtless that in the tale she is portrayed as an icon of passive suffering miraculously rewarded, and her moral perfections are more important than her outward appearance. The merchants give the Tale's only description of her an impressive moral blazon:

In hire is heigh beautee, withoute pride,
Yowthe, withoute grenehede or folye;
To alle hire werkes vertu is hir gyde;
Humblesse hath slayn in hire al tirannye.
She is mirour of alle curteisye;
Hir herte is verray chamber of hoolynesse,
Hir hand, minister of fredam for almesse.
(162-68)

Clearly, the inner clothing of the heart suits Custance's Christian character better than outward adornment. In contrast, Emaré, her counterpart in the romance of that name, is given a robe embroidered by a sultan's daughter with love-motifs; it helps to enflame the emperor her father to desire an incestuous marriage with her, and when she refuses he sets her adrift like Custance. The robe, which seems to Emaré's father a *fayry* or a *vanyté* (an enchanted garment or else an illusion), functions, initially, as a love-charm from the Orient threatening the Christian purity of the romance heroine.⁸ Custance is afflicted by no such symbolic garment forcing her to disobey her father; rather she goes meekly though reluctantly to marry the sultan at his bidding, clothed, metaphorically, in the virtues that have ensured the Saracens' conversion.⁹

Enchantment is often associated, in romance, with items that may be worn, like Arthur's scabbard in Malory's tale of *Merlin*, which prevents his wounds from bleeding as long as he keeps it upon him, or Canacee's ring in Chaucer's own *Squire's Tale*, which enables her to understand the language of birds. Accordingly, one should consider the possibility that the Man of Law may wear his barred girdle as a talisman, like the girdle Sir Bertilak's lady gave Gawain. Muriel Bowden, citing what seems to be a guess by J. M. Manly, calls the bars "narrow metal strips," and by the time of Fisher's edition they have become "metal ornaments".¹⁰ Ornaments might be devotional or else prophylactic. In 1388 a Man of Law, a Chief Justice named Tresilian, was condemned to death for treachery (such condemnations being an occupational hazard for high-profile officials in the Middle Ages), and in a desperate attempt to save his life told his executioners that he couldn't die because of certain objects he wore about him (probably not limited to pendants at his belt). Instead of abandoning their purpose, however, they searched him, removed his charms, and everything else, and "he was hanged naked, and to be more sure of his death they cut his throat" (Rickert 162).

But even if the bars on a Man of Law's girdle might be metallic, there is no evidence that Chaucer's Man of Law protected himself in his potentially hazardous occupation with a girdle hung with amulets, rather as the fifteenth-century French monarch Louis XI wore a hat studded with images of the saints. In *Quentin Durward*, Sir Walter Scott is "astonished that an intellect as acute as that of Louis XI certainly was, could so delude itself by a sort of superstition, of which one would think the stupidest savages incapable" (note IX). In chapter 28, Louis is reluctant to approach a stone crucifix "without having secured the private intercession of some supposed favorite. He therefore turned from the crucifix as unworthy to look upon it, and

selected from the images with which, as often mentioned, his hat was completely garnished, a representation of the lady of Clery, knelt down before it, and made the following extraordinary prayer. . . ." Such behavior would, of course, not have seemed so stupid to Chaucer's contemporaries as it did to the "enlightened" Protestant Scott. It would be consistent with Chaucer's humor for the Man of Law to wear talismans while telling a tale in which magic is only mentioned to show how absurd the barbarians were to accuse Custance, of all people, of it—but if this had been Chaucer's intention, he would surely have been more explicit.

While the Saracens attribute their sultan's infatuation to "magyk and abusoun" (214) and pagan Donegild claims that Custance is a fiend materialized with the help of sorcery and charms (755), Chaucer's narrator relies, instead, on Christian astrology and the power of the Cross, the one talismanic "ornament" that Custance may possibly be wearing or carrying. Early Christians observed that the intersection of the ecliptic and the equinoctial formed a cross, and Chauncey Wood notes that the sign *Libra* was often identified with the Crucifixion (286). When set adrift, at the mercy not so much of the stars or the waves as of God, Custance addresses the Cross in two stanzas that Chaucer added to the story he read in *Trivet*¹¹ and Gower. Chaucer would, of course, have known lyrics addressing the Cross, and it was conventional enough for his Christian heroine to pray in such terms: "She blesseth hire, and with ful pitous voys / Unto the croys of Crist thus seyde she" (449-50). She may have noticed the five stars in *Cygnus* that form the shape of the Cross, but Chaucer does not specify any visual object that prompts her prayer. Maybe she only makes the sign of the cross. Perhaps she is looking at the cross on the reverse of one of the gold coins that make up the treasure in her boat, or perhaps, as Fisher in his edition suggests, she is wearing a crucifix.¹² If so, hers may even be embossed with a likeness of Christ on it, for a crucifix has the power to expel fiends when laid upon those possessed by them, and hence she calls it "Flemere of feendes out of hym and here / On which thy lymes faithfully extenden" (460-61). Whether she wears it or not, the Cross functions for her in lieu of a magic talisman as a sign of her devotion to Christ.

The fifteenth-century Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino attributes talismanic powers to the astrological image of the cross:

For stars exert their greatest influence when they are in the four corners, or rather pivotal points, of the sky, that is, of the east or west, or of the midpoints on either side. So positioned, they cast their rays across each other so as to

form a cross. Accordingly the ancients called the cross a figure that was both made by stellar influence and capable of being imbued with such influence. Hence of all images it has the most considerable talismanic power, and it takes up the virtues and spirits of the Planets. . . .¹³

It was perfectly logical in a pre-scientific age to assume that God's foreknowledge would be written for those philosophers perceptive enough to interpret it in God's ever-reliable stars. Curry argues that Chaucer wrote the *Man of Law's Tale* to show that divine mercy can override astrological determinism,¹⁴ but it is the sultan's death that the stars predict, not Custance's, and the troubles that beset her marriages, through the malign influence of Mars. What the stars predict is pre-determined, but determined by the same protective God whose Cross is itself written in the heavens, and which Custance possibly wears, round her neck or in her belt, in the shape of a crucifix.

One object which Custance of course doesn't "wear" is the knife which Hermengyld's murderer tries to foist upon her. Chaucer's treatment of it is curious, as a comparison with Gower's tale of Constance brings out. In Gower the murderer himself finds the knife next to the sleeping Constance, where of course he knew he had put it, and is consequently loud in his denunciations of her. In Chaucer it is the king, Alla, who finds the knife, but what he *sees* is the "benignity" of the innocent Custance, which so affects him that he ignores the physical evidence against her. Instead, Alla makes her fate hang on the oath of the slanderer, since he is her only accuser, though ostensibly no more a witness to the deed than anybody else. In the legal wrangling in the post-Chaucerian *Merchant's Tale of Beryn*, possession of a knife is regarded as proof of guilt, and the owner of a knife is held responsible for any crime committed with it.¹⁵ In *The Man of Law's Tale*, however, Chaucer directs attention away from the physical to matters spiritual. Knife or no knife, Custance is simply too good to be guilty; but it takes divine intervention to prove it.¹⁶

Beset by evil, Custance survives entirely by divine grace. This the Man of Law emphasizes by citing biblical analogies, and also by one unlikely circumstance. The bloodthirsty sultaness, having massacred her son and his fellow Saracen converts, not only lets her Christian daughter-in-law go, although, from her point of view, Custance has caused all the trouble, but sees to it that Custance's boat is loaded up with food *and clothing* when she sets her adrift. She might well be only too happy to get rid of Custance's "tresor" (442), those gold nobles inscribed with the Cross, but this added generosity is unexpected. Thus, God provides the basic necessities for Custance's lonely two-year

voyage, and enables the Northumbrian constable to recognize her as a person of consequence (515).

But her clothing is not described, and hence is less obviously an identifying device than, for example, Emaré's magical robe, which so astounds the merchant Jurdan when he finds Emaré in her boat:

The cloth on her shon so bryth
He was aferde of that syght,
For glysteryng of that wede;
And yn hys herte he thowghth right
That she was non erdyly wyght. (697-701)

Custance is clothed more splendidly than this, metaphorically speaking, in that Christian faith which the sultaness has not only rejected but ironically exported for Northumbrian pagans to accept. Custance's "treasure" is not her gold or her attire, but her Christianity, in accordance with St. Paul's metaphor, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us" (2 Cor. 4:7).

Appreciating the Tale's lack of regard for finery helps one to make sense of its prologue about the hardships of poverty. This prologue is something of a puzzle (which Peter Beidler would solve by excising it altogether),¹⁷ since the deprivations Custance obviously does suffer plunge her into danger rather than destitution. When all is said and done, Custance lives well when she is in Rome, Syria, or Northumberland, and Chaucer makes a point of saying that the boats in which she is set adrift contain food and necessary gear. What the prologue does, if, *pace* Beidler, it belongs where it is, is to introduce the tone of *contemptus mundi* which Chaucer casts over Trivet's story by his extensive borrowing from Lotario di Segni's *De Miseria Humane Conditionis*.¹⁸ Chaucer turns a story of repeated hardship into a demonstration of Christian preservation, emphasizing the fact that there is no earthly salvation available for a humanity doomed to wretchedness by the Fall. We are not to have wealth and luxury, or any splendid array, flaunted at us in this tale, although at several points we might have expected it. Even though Custance was "fostred up so softe" (275), and her wanderings end in feasting and reunion, the tale concludes in death: "But litel while it lasteth, . . . / Joye of this world" (1132-33).¹⁹

This otherworldly ideal is reinforced by the contrast between Christ's mother, whose goodness at last puts an end to Custance's weary wanderings (950-52), and her non-Christian enemies whose wickedness caused them. Part I of the Tale is set in Syria, outside the

pale of Christendom, where the Saracens cannot even read their fate in the stars, where the sultan's infatuation is put down to magic, and where a conversion undertaken to secure a marriage is punished by treachery leading to massacre. The scorpion responsible is the sultan's mother, "riche and gay" (395), who comes to meet Custance suspiciously well turned out. She is in fact hiding, like the traditional scorpion, her poisonous intentions under a fair aspect. "Riche was th'array / Of Surryens and Romayns met yfeere" (393-94), but of Custance's dress and appearance we hear nothing. The sultan himself has not even seen her face in a picture, but has only heard the merchants' account of her virtues, these being all the adornments he needs to beautify the impression he has conceived of her. She could hardly be presented more differently than, say, the provocative Alison in *The Miller's Tale*, who is dressed to attract lords and yeomen, and the huge-hatted and scarlet-enfolded Alison of Bath, who having had five husbands and being in search of her sixth, is dressed, one might say, to kill.

Such ostentation is a distinguishing feature of the virago, "a standard monitory topos of later medieval antifeminist satire and discourse" (Schibanoff 68). The sultaness and Donegild are typical of women who "desire the accoutrements of power—crowns, girdles, ermines, and costly clothes—as ill-disguised weapons" in their battle to seize mastery from their menfolk.²⁰ They forfeit their femininity without, of course, achieving true masculinity: the sultaness is "Virago" and "serpent under femynynytee" (359-60), Donegild "mannish" or, worse, "feendlych spirit" (782-83). That Custance is the polar opposite of these her characteristically modest lack of ostentation makes clear.

The use of clothing to bewitch has perhaps never been better described than in the Miller's portrayal of Alison (I: 3233-70). The rhetorical device of the blazon typically starts at the top of the head and works downwards, as in the Harley lyric "Mosti ryden by Rybbesdale".²¹ But the gaze at Alison directs itself first at her girdle, then roves over the apron on her loins, and then for eight more lines moves up to her collar and headdress. Derek Traversi comments on the naturalness of the associations she evokes rather than on what she wears (67-69). But after delighted exclamations the voyeur's gaze drops suddenly to the purse at her girdle. Her coloring, her singing, her graceful movements intervene and then, after lingering at her mouth, the gaze rivets itself upon the brooch at her breast. It is a technique of representing delight by the device of the enthusiastic double-take. Finally come her shoes, and yet not quite finally, for we follow their lacings high up the leg, and the focal point of attention is back, almost, where it started. Yet Alison is not innocent of the attraction she is

causing: at the end of ten lines meticulously enumerating the garments she wears, the gazer suddenly encounters her "likerous ye" under artfully plucked brows staring enticingly back at him. There is a rapacity about her artful assumption of artlessness that corresponds to the predatory nature of the weasel to which she is compared. Custance in contrast does not stare back, but radiates: "She is mirour of alle curteisye" (166); and she is giving rather than grasping, for the merchants' portrait of her concludes with the hand that liberally ministers to the poor. The Man of Law's corrective to the Miller's description of Alison is to eschew outward display by concentrating not on what Custance wears but on the "hoolynesse" of her heart.²²

Custance's special status as an example of Christian purity is further emphasized by the nature of both her suffering and her subsequent escapes. The hazards Custance has to survive are of two kinds, natural and wilful, and her preservation from all of them is accounted for with the help of comparable biblical anecdotes. Poverty, the prologue begins by reminding us, inflicts thirst, cold, and hunger on those who suffer from it (100). Add to these the chance of drowning, and it is clear that Custance's risks are of the most elemental kind. Twice set afloat, Custance spends first three and then later five years drifting about the Mediterranean and Atlantic oceans. But Christ fed the five thousand and stilled the storm. So too Custance's food lasts out, and her clothing presumably does also, as the Israelites' shoes and raiment did in the wilderness²³ (Chaucer unfortunately misses that allusion). Like Jonah, who was even worse off, preserved in the depths of the sea in "the fisshes mawe / Til he was spouted up at Nynyvee" (486-87), she is washed up safe on shore.²⁴ On or approaching land she has another triple hazard to survive, this time from human enemies, but once again God miraculously preserves her. She escapes a general massacre, false witness, and attempted rape.

Although the biblical allusions illustrating these escapes do not feature clothing, in the anecdotes of David and Judith the omission again seems significant. Chaucer points out that David fought Goliath without armor, and in the same way Custance was devoid of physical protection when the lecherous steward in his struggles with her tumbled overboard and was drowned. Armor of course would only have impeded the agile David, who had no intention of fighting at close quarters. Similarly, Custance's clothing ought to have been an inadequate defense, since in the normal course of events she would scarcely have been strong enough to resist her attacker. In Gower's version she tricks the steward into looking out of the ship to make sure they are alone, and then pushes him overboard;²⁵ but such self-reliance would be out of place in Chaucer's tale, where she is typically a victim

entirely dependent on God's mercy, and there it is the steward's own lustful violence that sends him to his doom.

In the case of Judith, who saved her people by cutting off the head of the besieging general Holofernes, Chaucer makes no mention of clothing, either here or in *The Monk's Tale* where he tells her story again. But people who knew the biblical story well would recall that clothes play an important part in Judith's strategy. Judith was a widow who for three years and four months after her husband's death "put on sackcloth and always wore mourning" (Jth 8:4-5, NEB). When she conceived her plan she first "put ashes on her head, and uncovered the sackcloth she was wearing," and then prayed, referring to the terrible account of Simeon's vengeance on the Shechemites in Genesis 34: "Thou didst put in his hand a sword to take vengeance on those foreigners who had stripped off a virgin's veil to defile her, uncovered her thighs to shame her, and polluted her womb to dishonour her. . . . [G]ive to me, widow as I am, the strength to achieve my end. Use the deceit upon my lips to strike [the Assyrians] dead" (Jth 9:1-2; 9-10). She then removed the sackcloth and widow's weeds she was wearing, "put on a head-band, and dressed herself in her gayest clothes, which she used to wear when her husband Manasses was alive. She put on sandals and anklets, bracelets and rings, her earrings and all her ornaments, and made herself very attractive, so as to catch the eye of any man who might see her" (10:3-5). By the fourth day of her pretended defection to the conquerors of her supposedly doomed people, Holofernes is beside himself with desire for her. He throws a banquet, gets drunk, and becomes a paradigm for every man who has ever lost his head over a woman. Both the similarity and the distinction between the stories is apparent: like Judith Custance avoids rape, but she needs no seductive or deceitful tricks to do so. Here and elsewhere, God himself protects her without any outward show on her part. In Northumberland it is her inner virtue that persuades all except the envious to love and revere her (530-32; 621-25).

That head-band of Judith's does, however, remind us that Custance wore something similar. Apart from the girdle which the drunken messenger "wel . . . underpighte" with drink (789), and which is a mere metonymy for his bloated stomach, Custance's head covering is the only item of clothing that is specifically mentioned in the Tale. It was customary for a woman to wear a head covering to show that she was married. The gesture of removing hers could, in this instance, signify Custance's meek acceptance of the fact that Alla has, as she believes, repudiated her. But Chaucer complicates. Custance is not thinking of herself, but primarily of her son. She takes the will of Christ "in good entente" (824) and only wonders at Alla's hard

treatment of his son, not of her (857). And whereas Judith puts her headscarf on to make herself attractive to her enemies, Custance takes hers off to protect little Maurice from harmful sunshine. In a pathetic passage not derived from Trivet, Chaucer writes:

Hir litel child lay wepyng in hir arm,
And knelynge, pitously to hym she seyde,
"Pees, litel sone, I wol do thee noon harm."
With that hir coverchief of hir heed she breyde,
And over his litel eyen she it leyde . . . (834-8)

Commentators explain that it was believed that an infant's tender eyesight should be protected from the sunlight. They also mention that Abraham in many of the Mystery plays covers his son's eyes as he is about to sacrifice him.²⁶ So Custance is protecting her son Maurice as far as she is able. But since Donegild, ostensibly in the king's name, has ordered the constable to put them in a boat "and croude hire fro the lond" (801: crowd, thrust), they will need a miracle, as Isaac did, if they are to survive. Miraculously, God has graciously ensured that Custance's ship should be provided with food and "othere necessaries" (871), for Donegild, presumably wishing no trace of her sojourn in the country to remain, orders "al hir geere" (800) to be thrust away with her. Eventually, of course, the constable's despairing question — "how may it be / That thou wolt suffren innocentz to spille, / And wikked folk regne in prosperitee?" (814-16)—is answered when Donegild is put to death and Custance and Alla are reunited. Their reunion is a result of his journeying to Rome to do penance for his deed, which, just though it was, is still matricide and requires expiation. But meanwhile Custance shows more humility than the constable does: not merely accepting what seems to be God's will but actually welcoming it, she points out that the Blessed Virgin Mary's torment was incomparably worse than hers, since she saw her Son slain, whereas Custance's yet lives.

Besides the comparison, or what she calls "no comparison" (846) with Mary, in her tender care for her suffering child, the passage brings the legend of Veronica and the *sudarium* to mind. Veronica, it will be remembered, was the woman who supposedly gave her head cloth to Christ to wipe the sweat and blood from His face as He carried the Cross towards Golgotha; when He returned it there was a *vera eikon* or true likeness of His face imprinted upon it.²⁷ By the fourteenth century it had become an especially famous reason for pilgrims to make the journey to Rome where it was preserved. Custance's removal of her head cloth to protect her child is an act of compassion like Veronica's.

The other "garment" that Custance is advised to lay aside is, strangely enough, her "hoolynesse" (713)—or the narrator's unduly literal interpretation of it. Holiness is included among the virtues with which, in effect, the merchants' account of her to the sultan clothes her: "Hir herte," they told him, "is verray chambre of hoolynesse" (167). But when she marries Alla, "hoolynesse," in the restricted sense of holy virginity, is no longer an option for her. Chaucer adds a comment which Derek Pearsall considers "more than the narrative requires":²⁸

For though that wyves be ful hooly thynges,
They moste take in pacience at nyght
Swich manere necessities as been plesynges
To folk that han ywedded hem with rynges,
And leye a lite hir hoolynesse aside. (709-13)

Thus pruriently the Man of Law implies that what she really has to lay aside is her clothing. But a joke at the expense of Custance's iconographic holiness seems out of place in a tale that lauds her immaculate goodness. Admittedly, the medieval Church did rank virginity highest of the three states of womanhood; Chaucer's Parson, following Augustine and Jerome, calls it "the hundred fruyt" (X. 868-9) after the parable of the sower in Matthew 13. But to demean Custance by so rigid an interpretation of the *topos* seems at odds with the tenor of the Tale as a whole. In the Bible, submission to a husband is a metaphor for the Church's devotion to Christ,²⁹ and in any case her marriage to Alla is expressly given divine approval:

Jhesus, of his mercy,
Made Alla wedden ful solempnely
This hooly mayden, that is so bright and sheene;
And thus hath Crist ymaad Custance a queene.
(690-93)

Since it was customary to marry "with rynges" (712), Custance should have been wearing one, but if so it plays no part in the recognition scene when the senator introduces her to Alla. Typically self-effacing, she conceals her identity from the senator when he rescues her from the sea (971-73); then and thereafter, the ring is either overlooked by the narrator or hidden by Custance—as Chaucer says, "I may nat tellen every circumstance" (1011). It is Maurice's likeness to Custance that attracts Alla's attention; when Alla asks whose the child is, the senator says he knows nothing of Maurice's father, but cannot believe that the child is illegitimate since he has never come across

maid or wife so virtuous as Maurice's mother (1020-29). Either he has not observed her ring, which seems unlikely since she has lived in his house for a long time, or she is not in the habit of wearing any distinguishing mark of wifedom. Certainly Alla does not need to see a ring to know who she is: one look is enough for him (1053-54). Though her father is apparently slower to recognize her, he accepts her word that she is his daughter and Alla her lord, and eventually Alla goes home to England with "his hooly wyf so sweete" (1129).

Whether as maiden, wife, or mother of the future Christian emperor, Custance never lays her holiness aside. Far from joking that sexual contact is an embarrassment Custance must pretend not to like, the Man of Law is praising her gracious willingness to lay aside any moral vesture, or false morality, that might stand in the way of her perfect obedience to the will of Christ. If, as Paul Clogan says, *The Man of Law's Tale* seems to lack "realistic characterization and apparent descriptive detail" (217, n. 4), that lack is consistent with the meaningful absence of physical adornment that marks the entire exemplary narrative, in which Chaucer illustrates divine providence and portrays an idealized heroine arrayed in such virtues that the merchants can justly describe her as humble, prudent, courteous, holy, and generous.

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Notes

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented in a session on "Chaucer and Costume" sponsored by MAM at the 39th International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, 2004.

² Laura F. Hodges, *Chaucer and Costume, the Secular Pilgrims in the "General Prologue"* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000) 111. The costly silk would indicate the Sergeant's gentle or affluent status (122), but his "costume lacks three signs of his professional or social status": he has no coif, knife, or purse (112).

³ Quotations are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton, 1987).

⁴ One thinks of the descriptions of armor in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and in Chaucer's *Sir Thopas*. On the genre of *The Man of Law's Tale*, which Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: Routledge, 1985) 260, says "is not easily defined," see Paul M. Clogan, "The Narrative Style of *The Man of Law's Tale*," *Medievalia et Humanistica* 8 (1977): 217-33, who discusses it as hagiographic romance, and Helen Cooper, *The Canterbury Tales*, Oxford Guides to Chaucer (Oxford UP, 1989) 126, who calls it a pious legend. For Susan Schibanoff, in "Worlds Apart: Orientalism, Antifeminism, and Heresy in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*," *Exemplaria* 8 (1996): 59-96, however, it is "orientalist polemic" (see page 77). Helen Cooney, "Wonder and Immanent Justice in the *Man of Law's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 33 (1999): 264-87, points out that the story is based on Trevet's chronicle history, and characterizes it as an "exposition and attempted justification of the medieval Christian providential view of history" (266-67).

⁵ See *Sir Launfal*, in *Middle English Romances*, ed. Stephen H. A. Shepherd (New York: Norton, 1995). When Launfal is poor, his followers wear threadbare robes (139-44, 154-56), but Tryamour soon enriches him (376 ff.). For her and her damsels' attire see 889-91 and 940 ff. For another example see *Sir Degrevant*, stanzas 41-42, ed. L. F. Casson, *EETS* 221 (London, 1949): 42-43, where Melidor sports an ermine-furred velvet dress adorned with azure-enameled buttons too numerous to count.

⁶ In fact she not only bought from the Barbarian merchants, but also converted them to Christianity. See John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*

II.599-611, in selections edited by Russell A. Peck (Toronto: Rinehart and Winston, 1980) 108.

⁷ See, for example, Malcolm Andrew, *The Canterbury Tales: The General Prologue, Part One B, A Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Norman and London: Oklahoma UP, 1993) 288: "MLT has been taken to reflect a considerable range of the Sergeant's supposed characteristics, including his apparent wisdom and busyness, his acquisitiveness, and his unusual memory (Sullivan . . .); his materialistic world view (Wood . . .); his concern with appearances (David . . .); and his prudence and precision (Elliott . . .)." For a demurral, see Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales*, 259: "the tale is blighted by such interpretation."

⁸ *Emaré* 80-108, in *Six Middle English Romances*, ed. Maldwyn Mills (London: Dent, 1973). Amanda Hopkins, "Veiling the Text: The True Role of the Cloth in *Emaré*" in *Medieval Insular Romance: Translation and Innovation*, eds. Judith Weiss, Jennifer Fellows, and Morgan Dickson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000) 71-82, argues that there is nothing magical or particularly symbolic about the robe, which merely fans the emperor's already ignited lust. But in failing to make the robe causal instead of merely coincidental the author seems to have missed a trick. Mills notes that the robe must have a sexual significance, but Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London: Routledge, 1967) 139, believes that it symbolizes *Emaré's* inner (moral) perfections.

⁹ Virtues as metaphorical garments appear in Wyclif's sermons XII and XV; in the former he lists twenty, in the latter thirteen necessary garments for the Christian to wear; these include "love to each other not only in act but in habit," "unslothfulness," "bowels of mercy," and "the exultant peace of God." See English side-notes by F. D. Matthew for Iohannis Wyclif, *Sermones*, ed. Iohann Loserth (London, 1889; New York, 1966) III. 91-97 and 114-22. The *locus classicus*, of course, is St. Paul's injunction to "put on the whole armor of God": Eph. 6:11-17.

¹⁰ Muriel Bowden, *A Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (London: Macmillan, 1948; 1967) 171; John H. Fisher, ed., *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1977) 16. *MED* defines *barre* (6a), as "an ornamental (gold or silver) strip or bar, as on a girdle," but some editors gloss as "stripes"; see, for example, Malcolm Andrew, *The General*

Prologue, Variorum ed., 301. Françoise Piponnier in *Speculum* 77 (2002): 1317-18, reviewing Hodges, *Chaucer and Costume*, notes archaeological evidence for girdles decorated with metallic designs.

¹¹ For Chaucer's main source, Trivet's version of the legend, see Margaret Schlauch, in *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, ed. W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1941) 154-206. Gower's and Trivet's versions are compared to Chaucer's by Roger Ellis, *Patterns of Religious Narrative in the Canterbury Tales* (London: Croom Helm, 1986) 116-68.

¹² Fisher, 90, explains lines 460-61 as referring to "men and women who wear the Cross as talisman." Crucifixes, according to the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v, were worn as pectorals from as early as the fourth century, usually containing relics of the saints or slivers of the true Cross. But Chaucer's description suggests he has in mind a more elaborate effigy such as one might see in a church. A cross might figure as a pendant on a rosary, but it is stretching speculation too far to suggest that Custance uses a rosary either here or when she prays to Mary (841-54), since none is mentioned in the text.

¹³ *Works* (Bâle, 1576) 556. Ficino's Latin is quoted by Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1964) 72-73.

¹⁴ Walter Clyde Curry, *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences*, 2nd ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1960), esp. p. 189. Derek Pearsall (262-63 and 341, n. 12) on the basis of 477-78 capping 295-301, and Patricia Kean, *Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1972), II. 114-22, support Curry.

¹⁵ See *The Canterbury Interlude and Merchant's Tale of Beryn* 2294-2305, 3281-3310, 3786-3832, ed. John M. Bowers, *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteenth-Century Continuations and Additions* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Western Michigan University for TEAMS, 1992).

¹⁶ This would be an example of the populist desire for miraculous "immanent justice" which Helen Cooney (note 4 above) sees the *Man of Law's Tale* endorsing. In the case of the drunken messenger, however, "wit and sotil enquerynge" (888), which line 885 shows to mean torture, is required to ascertain the truth: see James Landman,

"Proving Constant: Torture and the *Man of Law's Tale*," *SAC* 20 (1998): 1-39.

¹⁷ Peter Beidler, "Chaucer's Request for Money in the *Man of Law's* Prologue," *Chaucer Yearbook* 2 (1995): 1-15, argues that Chaucer originally addressed the problematic prologue to a group of merchants in the hope of earning a fee to reduce his debts, and that its present location is merely a compiler's mistake.

¹⁸ As a result, says Alfred David in "The *Man of Law* vs. Chaucer: A Case in Poetics," *The Strumpet Muse* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1967), "in spite of the Christian context, the gloomy impression of mutability is even stronger [than in the *Knight's Tale*]" (128).

¹⁹ See Morton W. Bloomfield, "The *Man of Law's Tale*: A Tragedy of Victimization and a Christian Comedy," *PMLA* 87 (1972): 384-90. The tragedy is this world's woe, the comedy the joy which is to follow for the Christian victimized by the world.

²⁰ Schibanoff 68. This, of course, is the main theme of the *Wife of Bath's Tale*.

²¹ *The Harley Lyrics*, ed. G.L. Brook (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1948) 37-39.

²² For comment on Custance's "mature moral seriousness" revealed in these lines (162-68, the stanza quoted above), helping us to believe in the "extraordinary endurance" she will show in surviving her misadventures, see George R. Keiser, "The Spiritual Heroism of Chaucer's Custance," in *Chaucer's Religious Tales*, ed. C. David Benson and Elizabeth Robertson, *Chaucer Studies* 15 (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990) 121-36.

²³ Deut. 8:4 (AV): "Thy raiment waxed not old upon thee, neither did thy foot swell, these forty years."

²⁴ In the Middle English *Patience*, ed. J. J. Anderson (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1969), Jonah is advised to wash his clothes: "þenne he swepe to þe sonde in sluchched cloþes; / Hit may wel be þat mester were his mantyle to wasche" (341-42).

²⁵ *Confessio Amantis*, II, 1112-25. Gower locates the castle in Spain, and names the steward Thelous; Chaucer deliberately leaves both

location and villain unnamed, as if a “renegat” who has “reneyed oure creance” (an apostate who has renounced our [Christian] faith) deserves to have his name blotted out.

²⁶ See note to lines 837-8 in the *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 862.

²⁷ This is Giraldus Cambrensis’s false etymology of the name (in his biography of the Archbishop of York, *Speculum Ecclesiae*, ch. 6), which in fact is the same as Berenice.

²⁸ *The Canterbury Tales* 264. Roger Ellis, *Chaucer’s Religious Tales*, more harshly blames the narrator, saying, “Crucially missing from this shabby exercise in logic-chopping is any meaningful sense of the sacramental character of marriage” (154). David Raybin, who sees Custance’s historical function as primarily maternal, is more sympathetic in “Custance and History: Woman as Outsider in Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*,” *SAC* 12 (1990): 65-84, especially 76-77.

²⁹ Ephesians 5:23 (AV): For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the savior of the body.

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